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ST. GREGORIOS OF PARUMALA

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The Malankara Sabha

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His Holiness Writes...



Beloved in Christ,

As we prepare to celebrate the 123rd Feast of our beloved St. Gregorios of Parumala, we bow in deep reverence and gratitude for the radiant life and witness of this great shepherd of our Church. The life of St. Gregorios is a shining testimony of holiness, humility and steadfast commitment to Christ and His Church.

Today, we are living in an era where Christianity faces mounting challenges across the globe, manifesting as violence, forced conversions, attacks on churches and legal threats. In many parts of the world, Christians endure persecution, discrimination and even martyrdom for their faith. In other regions, subtle forces of secularism, materialism and moral relativism attempt to weaken our faith, erode our values, and silence our witness. In our own country, in Chhattisgarh, the recent attack on Nuns who devoted their lives to prayer, service and the welfare of others, is a matter of deep concern.

As we celebrate this great feast, we are reminded

that the life of a Christian is a constant struggle to uphold faith and righteousness amidst trials. Parumala Thirumeni lived during a time of great challenges for the Malankara Church—times of disputes, suffering and uncertainty. Yet, with his steadfast faith, unceasing prayer and gentle spirit, he became a beacon of hope, guiding the Church to unity and peace.

So also, today, as we face challenges of moral decline, individualism and social fragmentation, the teachings of Parumala Thirumeni remain profoundly relevant. He teaches us that the strength of a Christian lies in an intimate relationship with God through prayer; a life rooted in humility and a heart open to serve others selflessly. His humility reminds us that the power of the Church lies not in worldly influence but in spiritual strength. His compassion for the poor urges us to stand with the suffering, the marginalized and the oppressed, becoming the hands and feet of Christ in a broken world. We must draw courage from the words of Christ: "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). The history of the Church shows that faith purified by suffering becomes stronger and the blood of martyrs becomes the seed of new life.

Let this feast not be a mere remembrance, but a renewal of our commitment to live as true witnesses of Christ. Let us intercede through the prayers of Parumala Thirumeni for the protection of Christians worldwide, for the unity of the Church, and for the courage to proclaim the Gospel with love and conviction. May the life and teachings of St. Gregorios strengthen us to be fearless in faith, steadfast in prayer and compassionate in action.

With Apostolic Blessings,

Baselios Marthoma Mathews III

Gamophobia or fear of marriage, seems to be affecting many youngsters of marriageable age, nowadays. Though research in India, about this recent development is comparatively less, one study conducted under the auspices of the psychology department at Saurashtra University found that around 46% of the youth are reluctant to commit themselves to a marital relationship. Another research conducted by Nithin A.F., a Malayali consultant psychologist, rendered similar findings. Such researches reveal the fact that fear of marriage and reluctance to get married are increasing alarmingly.

Priority of excellence in career and concern for financial independence are prompting many to postpone marriage indefinitely, and also to avoid marriage. There are many who think that marital responsibilities will hinder personal freedom and enjoyment of life. Today, reports of incidents of domestic violence and the brutal murder of life partners, are increasing alarmingly, which can also be a reason for gamophobia. Those youngsters who see recurring conflicts and fights between their parents at home may also decide against marriage. Most of the studies in this regard show that this issue is affecting educated girls/ladies much more than their male counterparts.

Gamophobia is an issue that can adversely affect the future of families, communities, society, and various institutions. In the backdrop of the darkness of this issue, let us have a look at a few enlightening truths:

Christ's revelation that marriage is a plan of God Himself (St. Matthew 19:5,6) is noteworthy. When we submit to truly divine projects, though they appear difficult, they lead to an abundant life and lasting joy. A triumphant and glorious end of the travel through a narrow gate and a path full of hardships, as taught by the Lord, can be interpreted in connection with married life also. If married life is part of the will

of God, He will be with the married to fulfill this project successfully. But the question whether the married couples are with Him is decisive for the success and joy of married life. The faith of youngsters need to be strengthened to see the benefits of this vision and develop a positive attitude to marriage.

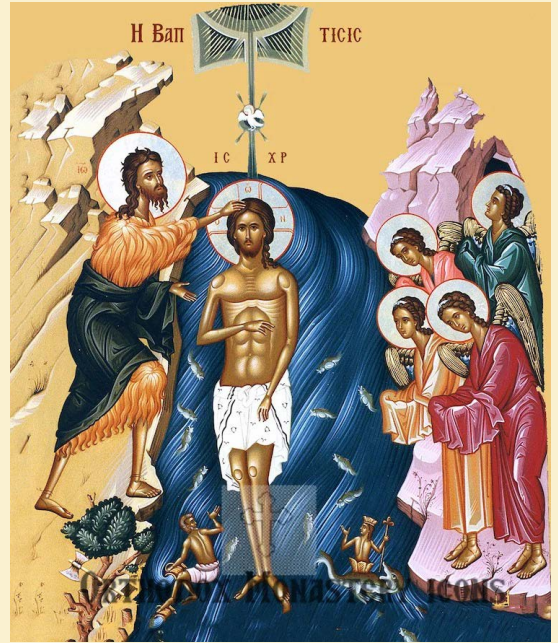
Jesus has taught about the importance of celibacy for deepening the dedication to serve God. A good number of people have followed and are still practising this monastic ideal. However, rejecting married life just for one's personal ambitions and enjoyment will not come under the purview of Jesus' celibacy teachings.

An enlightening exhortation of the gospel is that 'cross-bearing' is an integral part of Christian discipleship, and love must be expressed through sacrifice. The famous Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Franklyn's statement 'What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen goal' pours light on finding the meaning of life in cross-bearing for a great cause. If family life gives meaning to life, taking responsibility for it is part of cross-bearing for a good cause. So it is essential to be vigilant against those thoughts that propagate the false idea that sufferings and sacrifices one takes for a good cause are foolish.

Helping those who want to marry but are not able to fulfil their wish, is divine service. Raising children by teaching them that marriage is a holy and divine project, congratulating newly married couples- especially in the worshipping community, adults leading a healthy married life so that the youngsters will be encouraged to emulate them, should also be understood as part of the Gospel work today.

Bijesh Philip Achen

Editor, Malankara Sabha English Quarterly



Sacred Flames and Sanctified Streams: The Twin Mysteries of Nativity and Epiphany

Fr. Dr. K. M. Koshy Vaidyan

Introduction

The celebration of Christ's birth in Eastern Christianity represents far more than a simple commemoration of historical events. It embodies a profound theological journey that spans from the darkness of Advent fasting to the brilliant light of Epiphany, encompassing liturgical practices that have remained largely unchanged for over fifteen centuries. This exploration of the Nativity-Epiphany cycle in the Syrian Orthodox tradition, reveals how ancient Christian communities understood the Incarnation not merely as a past event, but as a transformative reality that continues to manifest through sacred liturgy, symbolic fire, and blessed waters.

Through examining the unique Fire-pit Service, the Order of Zuyoho, and the blessing

of waters at Epiphany, we discover how Eastern Christianity developed a holistic understanding of Christ's manifestation that encompasses his birth, baptism, and first miracle at Cana. This cycle demonstrates the church's response to early heresies, particularly Arianism, while simultaneously incorporating and transforming pre-Christian cultural elements into a distinctively Christian theological framework.

The Origins of December 25th

The selection of December 25th as the date for celebrating Christ's birth emerged through a complex interweaving of theological reasoning, historical circumstance, and cultural adaptation. While the exact date of Jesus' birth remains historically uncertain, early Christian theologians like Hippolytus of Rome (c. 204 AD) provided some of the earliest written references

to December 25th as the nativity date.

Fr. Dr. Baby Varghese identifies several converging factors that led to this choice: the Western Church's initial adoption of the date, theories connecting Christ's conception to his death date (March 25th), and the strategic appropriation of the Roman festival *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* ("birthday of the Unconquered Sun"). This latter connection allowed early Christians to present Christ as the true "Sun of Righteousness," transforming a pagan celebration into a proclamation of divine light conquering darkness.

The Eastern Church's Initial January 6th Tradition

The Eastern Church originally commemorated Christ's birth on January 6th, combining his nativity with his baptism and the Epiphany. This date held particular significance as it corresponded with winter solstice celebrations according to the Egyptian calendar, where pagans celebrated the birth of Aeon (the god of time and eternity) and believed that Nile waters miraculously transformed into wine.

The Armenian Apostolic Church maintains this ancient tradition, continuing to celebrate Christmas on January 6th according to the Julian Calendar, serving as a living link to the earliest Christian practices.

The Sacred Drama of Light: The Fire-pit Service

The Fire-pit Service represents one of the most distinctive elements of West Syriac Christmas liturgy, embodying the profound theological truth proclaimed by Isaiah: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2). This service serves as a visible manifestation of Christ as the Light of the World, dispelling the darkness of sin and bringing divine illumination to humanity.

The Fire-pit Service follows a carefully prescribed order that integrates seamlessly

with the broader Christmas liturgy. At the conclusion of the Midnight Prayer, before the Angelic Hymn begins, clergy and congregation process to the designated fire-pit area. The fire is lit during the Gospel reading (Evangelion), creating a powerful visual representation of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

The lighting of the fire is followed by a procession around the church, accompanied by either the Exaltation of the Cross or the Order of *Zuyoho*. This procession symbolizes the journey from darkness to light, mirroring humanity's spiritual transformation through Christ's incarnation.

The Night-to-Dawn Structure

The entire service is intentionally structured to begin at night and conclude at dawn, emphasizing Christ's role as the Light of the World. This timing reflects not only the traditional belief that Christ was born at night but also represents the cosmic significance of his birth as the moment when divine light entered a world shrouded in spiritual darkness.

The Order of *Zuyoho*:

A Liturgy of Universal Blessing

The term "*Zuyoho*" is derived from a Syriac verb meaning "to put in motion," "to move something," or "to lift up something." This ceremony embodies all these meanings as the celebrant lifts and moves sacred objects—typically a cross, but water at Epiphany and palm branches on Palm Sunday—while blessing the four cardinal directions.

Christological Focus

The Order of *Zuyoho* serves as a profound Christological statement, with the celebrant facing east, west, north, and south while proclaiming Christ's universal dominion. The liturgical text emphasizes Christ as the one "whom the angels minister," "whom the cherubim bless," and "whom the seraphim sanctify," creating a cosmic vision of worship

that spans heaven and earth.

The congregation's responses of "Holy are You, O God," "Holy are You, O Almighty," and "Holy are You, O Immortal" echo the Trisagion, connecting this local liturgical act to the eternal praise offered by heavenly hosts.

The Evolution of Christmas Celebrations: From East to West

The spread of December 25th as Christmas followed distinct geographical and chronological patterns. St. John Chrysostom recorded its adoption in Antioch around 375, while Constantinople embraced the celebration through St. Gregory of Nazianzus' efforts in 379. Alexandria began observing the Nativity by 433, and Jerusalem followed in the late 6th century.

This gradual adoption reveals how liturgical practices spread through ecclesiastical networks, with major urban centers serving as nodes for transmitting new observances throughout their surrounding regions.

Response to Arianism

The elaborate celebration of Christmas gained particular prominence as a response to Arianism and other heresies that denied Christ's full divinity. The First Council of Nicaea (325 AD) had condemned Arianism, and Christmas celebrations became opportunities to affirm Christ's divine nature and eternal sonship.

Church Fathers used Christmas liturgies and sermons to deliver strong theological statements countering heretical claims, making the joyous celebration simultaneously a proclamation of Orthodox Christian belief and a defense against doctrinal deviation.

The Forty-Day Fast

The Syrian Church maintained a forty-day Nativity Fast beginning November 15th, as recorded in the *Hudaya Canon* (Nomocanon). This extended period of preparation through fasting, prayer, and abstinence allowed believers

to spiritually prepare for the celebration of the Incarnation.

The canon distinguishes between different groups: ascetics observed the full forty-day fast from November 15th, lay people in the West fasted for two weeks from December 10th, and those in the East observed from December 1st onward.

Roman influence eventually reduced the Advent fast period to twenty-five days in the Syrian Church, though Coptic and Byzantine Churches continue to observe the November 15th starting date. The Second Council of Tours (567) established December as a month of fasting, specifically mandating daily fasting for monks until Christmas.

This evolution demonstrates how liturgical practices adapted to local conditions and ecclesiastical politics while attempting to maintain their essential spiritual purpose.

January 1st: Circumcision and New Beginnings

The Feast of the Circumcision, observed on January 1st, commemorates Jesus' circumcision eight days after birth according to Luke 2:21. This observance maintains the connection between Christ's Jewish heritage and his universal mission, while also serving as the *dukhrono* (remembrance) of All Holy Fathers and Doctors of the Church, particularly St. Basil and St. Gregory of Nyssa. The Second Council of Tours (567) first established this feast, which the Eastern Orthodox Church has observed since the eighth century, combining it with the anniversary of St. Basil's death.

The Theological Significance of Denho

The Syriac term *denho* means "the rising of the sun" and theologically denotes the divine manifestation of Jesus at his Jordan baptism. This feast, also called Theophany, celebrates the clear appearance of the Holy Trinity to humanity: the Father's voice from heaven, the incarnate Son standing in the Jordan River, and

the Holy Spirit descending in dove form.

Historical Development and Pagan Connections

The earliest indication of Epiphany celebrations on January 6th, appears in Clement of Alexandria's writings (215 AD), noting that Basilidians (a Gnostic sect) celebrated Christ's baptism on this date. The feast, most likely, developed in the Greek Church as a response to this Gnostic observance.

The date also corresponded with pagan celebrations of the god Aeon (time and eternity), supposedly born of a virgin. Alexandrian pagans performed rituals involving Nile water, believing it acquired miraculous powers and transformed into wine on this night. These beliefs may have influenced the Christian adoption of January 6th for celebrating Christ's birth, baptism, and first miracle at Cana.

The Water Blessing Ceremony

The Orthodox Syriac tradition includes an elaborate water blessing service during Epiphany. The priest takes a jar containing water and a cross, exalting it toward all four cardinal directions. The blessed water is then taken to the baptismal font, where drops are placed on the eastern, western, and north-to-south sides while the congregation recites Psalm 51.

Following the font blessing, the jar is brought to the altar for concluding prayers before the celebration of the Holy Qurbana (Divine Liturgy). At the end of the service, all participants drink the blessed water, physically

consuming the sanctified element that connects them to Christ's baptism in the Jordan.

Conclusion

The Nativity-Epiphany cycle in Eastern Christianity reveals a sophisticated theological understanding of the Incarnation that extends far beyond simple historical commemoration. Through the sacred fire that dispels darkness, the blessing of waters that restores Paradise's glory, and the cosmic liturgies that proclaim Christ's universal dominion, these ancient traditions offer contemporary believers a profound engagement with the mystery of God becoming human.

These traditions reveal how liturgy can transcend temporal boundaries, allowing contemporary worshippers to participate spiritually in the events that occurred in Bethlehem and at the Jordan River two millennia ago. Through the work of the Holy Spirit manifested in sacred action, word, and symbol, the ancient becomes eternally present, and the historical becomes personally transformative.

The preservation of these traditions within the Syrian Orthodox Church provides the broader Christian world with invaluable insights into how the earliest communities understood and celebrated the central mysteries of faith. As Christianity continues to engage with contemporary cultural challenges, these ancient liturgical treasures offer both inspiration and guidance for maintaining authentic Christian identity while effectively communicating eternal truths to new generations.



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UGC, THE DIRECTIVE PRINCIPLES FOR LIFE: UNDERSTANDING, GIFT AND CHOICE

[EXPOSITION ON DEUT: 7:6-9]

Fr. Dr. Jacob Mathew Karichal

Introduction

Glory to the Triune God. Greetings to all the readers of Malankara Sabha Magazine. In this article I would like to present an exposition of the Word of God in the Biblical Passage Deuteronomy 7:6-9. It is a message from the great prophet Moses regarding the earmarking of the Israelites as “the People of God.” It is an invitation to understand their life as that of “the People of God.”

The crux of the text of Deuteronomy 7:6-9 is about the enduring love of God for his chosen people:

“.....for you are a holy people unto the Lord....a special people unto himself..... because the Lord loved you. Therefore, keep His commandments...you will be blessed forever....”

Context of the Passage:

This passage is part of Moses’ final

address to the Israelites, as they prepare to enter the Promised Land, setting the stage for understanding their mission and special identity. This occurs just before Moses’ withdrawal and the transfer of leadership to Joshua, who would lead the next generation into Canaan. While it marked the end of an era it also affirmed the continuity of God’s covenant with the new generation.

Moses stands at Mount Pisgah, visualizing the entry of the people of God into the Promised Land and occupying it. But Moses, who brought the people out of Egyptian slavery, is at the cross roads: facing grievous life-threatening problems. The person who risked his life for liberation is to withdraw from the mission, without the fulfillment of his dream, and is to be removed from the face of the earth. The law giver is about to be removed by the Law, the interpreter is losing his wit.



Message

The message given through the quoted passage could be stated in the mnemonic UGC: Understanding, Gift and Choice. The text focuses on the required Understanding of people to realize that they are the Treasured Possession of the Lord. They are urged to comprehend God's true Gift of Love. The passage also communicates the Choice of Covenantal faithfulness expected of God's people. These three are the all-time directive principles for life.

1. UGC: Understanding

Firstly, the people are advised to understand that they are the 'treasured possession' of the Lord. The text vehemently communicates that their self-understanding defines them. Israel's Understanding of themselves as the people of God gave them a sense of who they are, their identity, purpose of life and the values they formulated. They felt that YHWH chose them and put them in a covenantal relationship. The idea of calling them as the "Holy Nation" (Ex. 19: 6; Lev.20:26) gave them a feeling that they are the family of God (Deut. 14:1; Hos. 11:1). Israel got the



Understanding of being "set apart" ("hagioi-" Gk) by God. What is the intended meaning of the usage of the Greek word *Hagios*? What significance does it have today? What is the Understanding about being a Christian? Or what does it mean to be a Christian? What is the implication of being a Child of God?

During my schooldays, in the mango season, we used to wake up in the wee hours looking for ripe mangoes that would have fallen on the ground. As there were no boundaries or fences between the adjoining houses and properties, we were free to roam around. We often got plenty of mangoes and at times jack fruits too, which we would keep on the verandah and then go for a bath in the nearby river. By the time we returned, Amma or my elder sister would have taken the mangoes, cleaned and sorted them out. They would give us our share. After a further multi-level quality check, my Amma and elder sister, would set aside the mangoes that are ripe, unblemished and attractive in color, and keep them in safe custody in the meal-safe, for visitors, relatives and their children, who were bound to drop in, as it was vacation time. The good mangoes were "set apart" (*hagioi*) to fulfil a special purpose. It would be announced at the breakfast table that we were expecting certain specific people to visit us and that "those Mangoes in the meal-safe are 'set apart' for "ammamma" [those days no aunty] and their kids.

We children learnt many valuable lessons from such interventions, for example: the best is for the others and that only good things will be 'set apart' for certain intended purposes. When the children of Israel were informed that they are to be set apart for certain purposes to be fulfilled, they had to get this 'understanding' and internalize the expected qualities, to live up to the earmarking.

When one claims that s/he is the child of God, they need to be mindful of the required

qualities. When I am named as Christian, the Christ in me is to be a fact and not a label. All earmarkings have certain purposes to fulfill. Being set apart itself is a commitment and the self-imposed requirements are for the benefit and betterment of others.

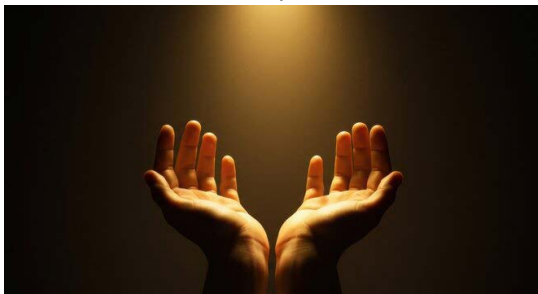
Am I truly convinced that I'm chosen by God? Do I have that genuine feeling of being "set apart"? Don't we have that earnestness to commit to the cause to which my calling is attached? Seeing me at a special place in that status [just as the mangoes being set apart and kept in the meal safe], do others have that feeling that "yes, it is good that s/he is chosen?" I am concerned about my self-understanding that I am the child of God.

2. UGC: Gift of Love

Secondly, the people of God are expected to sense God's true love gifted to them. Gifts always create an atmosphere of happiness.

The passage makes it categorically clear that the selection of the Israelite people was absolutely because of God's unconditional love and beyond any measure of their worthiness. It states, 'you were selected to the precious status, not because you were numerous, not because you were good, nor because you were great'. Then why were they selected?

The words of Moses make it clear that the selection "is a gift of love," which did not require one to be put through the usual selection process of various categories and criteria. The Israelites, were few in number, living as slaves in an alien land, in a desperate situation. There



was no body to accept them or encourage them for what their ancestors did or for the profound contributions their forefathers and mothers made for the upliftment of society [Ex.1:8]. The existing generation was contributing greatly for the upkeep of Egyptian agricultural production, its infrastructural development, cultural proliferation and its life. All of it was just being ignored by the Egyptian rulers and common people alike. In short, the people of Israel had nothing to project as prerogatives to claim the gift of love.

How does this negation of prerogatives and the endowment of love apply to us today? Just as the life of the Israelites, we are privileged to get established in life. But for each of us, what prerogatives do we have in life? What privileges or claims do we have? Once, a small boy was visiting an open market along with his parents. He approached a vendor who was selling balloons and watched the children showing their skills with the colored balloons going up in the sky. He asked the balloon seller, "Uncle, will this red balloon go up?" "Yes, it will," came the reply. The boy once again asked, will that blue one go up uncle?" "yes." The boy once again asked, "will the other balloons in pink and yellow go up?" The exasperated balloon seller replied, "Lad, the balloons don't go up based on their color, rather, on the basis of the gas with which it is filled."

Yes that reply declares everything, people may look different on the outside, but they can live only on the basis of the blessings they get from the creator. Those are not prerogatives of the person, rather 'the gas with which the balloon is filled.' Just as St Paul rightly pointed out, 'we are strengthened with the power of the one who strengthens us.' If the filling is lost, the mettle is lost, everything is lost.

With what attitude do we cherish the gift of love from the Triune God? What about the life we have? What about the food we have? How

will we respond to the blessings and graces we enjoy every moment of our lives? Are we thankful to the Lord? Are we grateful to the society which makes our lives happen?

Every moment of Israel's life was a blend of the providence of the Lord and of the murmuring of the people in their dissatisfaction. Lord cared for them by taking them out of the clutches of Egyptian bondage and provided them with water, food, ways for their journey et al. They were enjoying the providence all through their lives [shade of cloud and the light of the pillar of fire]. But they rebelled. They murmured continuously.

Let the reader ponder over one's own life, what kind of attitude s/he is developing towards

the care and protection s/he enjoys, and to the pressures and difficulties around?

3. UGC: Choice of Covenantal Faithfulness

Thirdly, the people of God are expected to sense the requisition to make the choice of Covenantal Faithfulness. If they fail to obey, they will suffer with disease, defeat and destruction. Therefore, it is clear that Covenantal Faithfulness and obedience is the main ingredient in the chain of existence and non-existence. Between birth and death there are choices in life [B- C - D]. The people of God are expected to make a choice in life to commit themselves to the obedience of God's Commandments. Commandments of the Lord mean, the Ten Commandments first, then the Covenant Code in Ex. 20: 21-Ch.23. It also points to the Holiness Code [Lev. Chs.17-26] and to the Deuteronomic Code [Deut. Ch. 16-26]. Since the Commandments refer to the will of God, obedience expected is not restricted to any particular Code stated above, rather to the mind and the will of God.

It is an invitation not simply to be legalistic, rather to follow life in everything. People of God are to seek the will of God in everything: in public life, in private aspects and in familial facets of one's life.

Conclusion

In short, the Choices of Covenantal faithfulness points to the consistency and commitment expected of the people of God. It is the directive principle for God's own people. Sensing the privileged position of God's own people and the divine endowments, commitment and faithfulness should become a way of life for the people of God. Let us rise to the demands.



(Rev. Fr. Dr. Jacob Mathew Karichal is the Registrar of the Federated Faculty for Research in Religion and Culture (FFRRC), Kottayam and a Faculty member of Orthodox Theological Seminary, Kottayam.)



MAR GREGORIOS OF PARUMALA: SAINT, PIONEER AND TRAILBLAZER

Prof. Jacob Kurian Onattu



Metropolitan Geevarghese Mar Gregorios, popularly known as Parumala Thirumeni, was the first person of Indian origin to be canonized from the Syrian Christian denominations of Kerala otherwise known as St. Thomas Christians. The Holy Episcopal Synod of the Malankara Orthodox Church presided over by the then Catholicos, His Holiness Baselios Geevarghese II, officially declared the Metropolitan as a saint on 2nd November 1947 on the occasion of the 45th anniversary of his demise.

Geevarghese was born on 15th June 1848 at Mulanthuruthy. He was the younger son of Kochu Mathai and Mariam who hailed from the illustrious Chathuruthy family. Having learned the alphabets and arithmetic under local teachers (*Asans*), the young boy was sent to his uncle's home to study Syriac and the Bible. His uncle, Fr. Geevarghese Chathuruthy, was a great Syriac scholar and *Malpan*. Young Geevarghese would chant Syriac songs melodiously and the *Malpan* fervently wished that his nephew would succeed him as the Vicar of the famous Mulanthuruthy Marthoman Church. Thus, at the tender age of 10, Geevarghese was ordained a 'Koruyo' — a sub-deacon in charge of reading the Holy Scriptures during the divine liturgy.

While deacon Geevarghese was continuing his priestly formation training under the guidance of the great Malpan, tragedy struck. Small pox, a fatal epidemic was spreading in and around Mulanthuruthy and the Malpan was

infected. While other trainees ran for their lives, Deacon Geevarghese remained at the Malpan's house, tenderly nursing his great Guru. Soon after, the Malpan succumbed to the disease and the deacon also became a victim of the same. The disease became worse over time and death was almost imminent. At the peak of his illness, deacon Geevarghese had a vision of Mother Mary standing near him. The Holy Mother assured him that the illness would abate and advised him to set apart his remaining days for God's work. After his miraculous recovery, the deacon decided to become a celibate priest in full devotion, discipline and total commitment to God and the Church.

After the demise of his uncle, Deacon Geevarghese continued his priestly training under the tutelage of the famous Konatt Malpan, Pampakuda. In those days, Mar Coorilos, a bishop from Syria came to Kerala to protect the Orthodox faith from Anglican onslaughts. Impressed by the deacon's proficiency in the Syriac language and his upright life, Mar Coorilos appointed him as his secretary and interpreter. He also ordained the deacon as a priest and Chor-Episcopos.

From his early days, Fr. Geevarghese was drawn towards monastic life. His role model was St. Anthony of Egypt, who is regarded as the father of Christian monasticism. He wished to renounce worldly pursuits and possessions like Anthony and devote himself fully to spiritual practices. So, he shifted his residence to Vettikkal Dayara and began leading a life of prayer and fasting. At about this time, Pulikkottil Joseph Mar Dionysius II, the Malankara Metropolitan, wanted to establish a centre somewhere in South Kerala to impart proper training to priest aspirants. He required a pious Ramban to be in charge of the new centre. The mantle fell on Geevarghese Chor-Episcopos in recognition of his vast scholarship and devout life. He was therefore professed as

a Ramban (monk- priest) in 1872.

In 1875, His Holiness Patriarch Peter III came to Kerala and visited parishes and monasteries. The Patriarch also was impressed by Geevarghese Ramban's scholarship, ascetic life and piety. He chose the Ramban as his secretary and interpreter. The Patriarch consecrated six Metropolitans during this visit, thereby deviating from the usual practice of having only one Metropolitan for entire Malankara. Thus, Geevarghese Ramban was elevated as Metropolitan in 1876 at North Parur church, with the new name 'Geevarghese Mar Gregorios'. He was the youngest among the six newly consecrated bishops and people fondly called him 'Kochu Thirumeni'. Metropolitan Mar Gregorios was given charge of Niranam, the Diocese founded by Apostle St. Thomas. After assuming office as Bishop of the Niranam Diocese, Thirumeni stayed at Parumala Seminary, thereby earning the name Parumala Thirumeni.

Offering training to deacons and priest aspirants was one of the major tasks Thirumeni undertook at Parumala. This and other administrative responsibilities did not deter him from fasting, prayers and meditation. As the temporary chapel at Parumala was found inadequate, Thirumeni was instrumental in building a beautiful church and a seminary building there. In the course of time, Thumpamon and Kollam dioceses also came under his administration. The saintly Metropolitan ardently desired the Malankara Church to spread beyond Kerala. He played a pivotal role in consecrating Fr. Alvarez, a Catholic priest from Goa as the Metropolitan of Bombay and Mangalore. He undertook a voyage to Colombo (Sri. Lanka) in 1892 to consecrate Fr. Rene Vilatte, a Roman Catholic priest from the United States as a Metropolitan in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. In 1895, Thirumeni embarked on a pilgrimage to the

Holy Land. Thirumeni was the first bishop from Malankara to visit the important places near Jerusalem where Jesus Christ was crucified and entombed.

During the latter years of his life, Parumala Thirumeni suffered from chronic abdominal pain. In spite of his frail health, the saint carried out his pastoral duties and ascetic practices with great dedication. His intense fasting and prayers worsened his illness. On 2nd November 1902, Thirumeni peacefully departed from this world at the young age of 54. His mortal remains were entombed at Parumala Seminary and the place has since become a notable pilgrimage centre for people from all walks of life.

Saintly life marked by prayer and fasting was not the only quality which made Parumala Thirumeni stand head and shoulders above his contemporary spiritual leaders. He was a man who walked ahead of his time, a visionary leader, pioneer and trailblazer who left indelible imprints on the society of his times.

His contributions were not restricted to the spiritual realm alone. First of all, Thirumeni was a great educator. He gave paramount importance to proper formation of the clergy. Thirumeni trained deacons and priest aspirants at Vettikkal Dayara and Parumala Seminary teaching them the Scriptures, Liturgy, Syriac, Theology as also high moral values. Thirumeni attached great importance to secular education as well. He saw education as a means of empowerment and encouraged the establishment of schools in the context of the limited educational infrastructure in the 19th century. Many of the schools run by the Malankara Orthodox Church now, were inspired by Thirumeni's vision of education.

Secondly, Parumala Thirumeni was a great social reformer. A contemporary of Sree

Narayana Guru and Chattampi Swamikal, Thirumeni also worked extensively for the upliftment of marginalized communities. He was against caste discrimination and propagated the idea of social equality and human dignity. He baptized many "new Christians" from depressed communities. Thirumeni founded special churches for them at Chennithala and Kalikunnu. The Metropolitan made it clear that this was only a temporary arrangement and that these "new Christians" would be given membership in mainstream churches in due course.



Thirdly Parumala Thirumeni was a man of letters. After his visit to the Holy Lands (1895), he authored a book titled 'Oorslem Yatravivaranam' (Journey to Jerusalem) which is regarded as the first travelogue in Malayalam.

Thirumeni was instrumental in translating many books of prayers into Malayalam. Many of his letters to priests, parishes and relatives are still available in print. These are valued for their spiritual depth, clarity and moral guidance.

Lastly, Parumala Thirumeni was an authentic model of Eastern spirituality. He has been described as "the Saint Anthony of the Malankara Church". Like Saint Anthony who lived in Egypt in the 3rd century, Thirumeni spent long hours in prayer and meditation. His lifestyle was modelled on the Eastern ideal of asceticism and detachment from worldly pleasures. Parumala Thirumeni is not a distant saint, but a living intercessor who continues to guide, bless and mediate for us.



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FROM PROPHECY TO REALITY: Jesus' Birth in the Gospel of St. Matthew

Dn. Mammen Joseph

Mathew was a tax collector (Matt. 9:9) whose duty was to collect tolls levied against various merchandise being carried by various caravans. He is also called Levi and worked under Herod Antipas. He allegedly wrote oracles in the Hebrew language and wrote the Gospel bearing his name. The Gospel he wrote was written for Jewish-Christians in a Jewish environment.

1. THE GOSPEL OF St. MATTHEW

The Gospel of St. Matthew offers the most comprehensive account of Jesus Christ's birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection. Traditionally attributed to the disciple Matthew, the Gospel reflects a first-century Jewish Christian context, yet it also engages the Greek-speaking Gentile world. Its main purpose is to present Jesus as the prophesied Messiah, fulfilling Jewish expectations. Church Fathers like Irenaeus and Origen claimed Matthew wrote in Hebrew, later translated into Greek, a view somewhat supported by manuscript tradition. It is clear that the Gospel aims to demonstrate that Jesus fulfils messianic prophecy.

2. THE WAY St. MATTHEW USES THE OLD TESTAMENT

Matthew's use of the Old Testament is part of a broader New Testament pattern where writers frequently quoted and interpreted Old Testament texts. David L. Baker and Stephen Motyer emphasize that this engagement is foundational to the New Testament, which cannot be fully understood apart from the Old Testament. It is noticeable that Matthew alone contains over fifty quotations, often extensive passages, mainly from the prophets.

2.1. Types of Old Testament Prophecies in St. Matthew

St. Matthew's Gospel uses two main types of Old Testament references: fulfilment quotations and allusive quotations.

2.1.1. Fulfilment quotations (also called formula quotations) are direct citations introduced with phrases like "so that what was spoken might be fulfilled." There are about 10 to 12 of these, covering events such as Jesus' birth (e.g., Matt 1:23; 2:6, 15), ministry, and passion (e.g., 26:56; 27:9–10). These quotations show a

blend of Hebrew (Masoretic) text and the Greek Septuagint (LXX) raising scholarly debates over whether Matthew crafted these forms himself or used existing sources.

2.1.2. Allusive quotations are indirect references where Old Testament language or ideas influence the text without being cited verbatim. Scholars note that while Matthew directly quotes the Old Testament 53 times, there are about 93 total references when allusions are included - suggesting around 40 allusions. These may come from memory and do not aim for textual precision.

Matthew made extensive use of the Old Testament to demonstrate that every aspect of Jesus' life - His birth, ministry, death, and resurrection was part of God's divine plan. This is reflected in his frequent use of fulfilment phrases like "this happened to fulfil what was spoken". Often, Matthew edited or adapted these citations to fit his narrative context.

Matthew, as a literate Jewish Christian, possibly a scribe was steeped in the Scriptures and used them to affirm Jesus' identity as the Messiah and son of David. His writing was not only theological but apologetic, aiming to convince and evangelize his fellow Jews using their own Scriptures. Beale and others argue that Matthew's many Old Testament references stem from both his Jewish background and his desire to preserve Jewish heritage, as Christianity spread. Matthew shows that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament legally (by keeping and interpreting the Law), prophetically (as the long-expected Messiah), and analogically (as the embodiment of divine wisdom).

In essence, Matthew used the Old Testament to prove Jesus' messianic identity, affirm the continuity between Judaism and Christianity, and evangelize a sceptical Jewish audience by grounding the Gospel in the authority of their sacred texts.

2.2. Matthew's Hermeneutical Method of the Old Testament

Some Old Testament Scholars see Matthew not only as a 'conservative redactor', but also as a 'creative writer'. They are of the argument that the Gospel of Matthew employs the 'pesher method' - an interpretive technique found in the Dead Sea Scrolls where Old Testament texts are applied to present situations without strict regard for their original context. Scholars like Lee Campbell and Walter Kaiser Jr. acknowledge that pesher involves modifying texts to suit contemporary theological needs and often lacks consistent methodology.

For example: Matthew 2:15, discussing how Jesus was kept in Egypt till Herod died, is supposedly the fulfilment of Hosea 11:1, according to Saint Matthew. But taking the baby Jesus to Egypt is out of context because the immediate context of Hosea 11:1 is the relationship between Jehovah and Israel. Jehovah, as Father, is reminding Israel, his "Son," that He has always loved them, and the proof of this love can be found in the origins of Israel, the religious exodus of Israel from Egypt. Juxtaposing Matthew 2:17-18 as a fulfilment of Jeremiah 13:15, where Rachel mourns over her children, is out of context. Matthew 4:15-16, as fulfilling Isaiah 9: 1-2, is also problematic.

However, some scholars like Craig Keener aver that Matthew was not ignoring context but rather comparing Jesus' ministry with Israel's history and the promises in the contexts evoked by those texts.

2.3. Why did Matthew Make Extensive Use of the Old Testament?

He wanted to emphasize not only the coming of Jesus but to prove that everything that happened to Him at birth, infancy, ministry, and death were all part of the divine plan. This is evident in the many phrases used by Matthew

regarding how an event happened to fulfil what was said earlier in the Old Testament. The texts used by Matthew were therefore often edited by him to fit into whatever context he was discussing.

Matthew, as a Jew, wanted Judaism to fulfil its destiny as heir to the promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 that through him, all the nations would be blessed. The numerous citations from the Old Testament were a sign that what God had promised Abraham had happened in the person of Jesus. Jews who had become Christians were concerned about their family members who did not believe in Jesus, Matthew was also concerned and wrote his Gospel with that in mind trying to do everything possible in proving by use of the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus was that promised Messiah and the son of David. He wanted to ensure that the Jewish heritage and Jewish Scriptures were not abandoned as the Christian message moved quickly across significant cultural barriers. Matthew was interested in proving to them that Jesus was the fulfilment of ancient Scriptures - to inform, convince and evangelize regarding Jesus being the Messiah.

3. FORMULAIC PHRASE "THAT IT MIGHT BE FULFILLED"

This section focuses on Matthew's use of 'fulfilment formulae', particularly the phrase: "to fulfil what had been spoken by the prophet, saying...". This introductory clause used in at least ten direct Old Testament quotations is unique to Matthew's Gospel and reflects his redactional style, not found in other contemporary Jewish or Christian writings except six similar usages in the Gospel of John ("that the scripture might be fulfilled" - Jn. 12:38; 13:18; 15:25; 17:12; 19:24, 36).

Matthew primarily uses these formula quotations before the passion narrative,

showing that Jesus' life and ministry were already fulfilling prophecy. In addition to these, there are around 35 other citations with different introductory phrases and many indirect allusions to the Old Testament. The concept of 'fulfilment' is metaphorical, suggesting that Scripture is like an empty vessel that Jesus fills with meaning. This idea is rooted in the Old Testament itself (e.g., Numbers 23:19, Isaiah 55:11) and is not a New Testament invention. In this theological framework, Jesus is portrayed as the eschatological envoy, the one through whom God's final promises are realized.

The solemn tone of the fulfilment formula signals to readers that a divine purpose foretold in the Scriptures has now reached its climax in Jesus marking not just historical events, but the unfolding of God's ultimate plan.

4. FUNCTION OF THE FULFILMENT PHRASE

Early Christianity started as a community of interpretation within the context of early Judaism. The expression of fulfilment of Scripture had an important function in communication between Christians. The Christian faith had to be legitimized by reference to Scripture. What happened to Jesus and the rise of the Christian church were to be identified as the fulfilment of the promises of the Jewish Bible.

Moreover, the fulfilment quotations in the Gospel of Matthew have internal and external functions too. Internally, these quotations helped early Christians understand their faith in Jesus in relation to Israel's Scriptures and God. Externally, they served an apologetic and missionary role, used to defend Christian beliefs against Jewish criticism and attract new converts.

Matthew's use of Scripture must be seen within his social and religious context - a time of growing conflict between Jewish Christians and the synagogue. Scholars note that the Gospel of

St. Matthew was written during a period of tension and estrangement from mainstream Judaism. His Gospel responds to this pain and alienation by asserting that Jesus is the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel. By linking Jesus to the Old Testament prophecies, Matthew aimed to defend the legitimacy of his community's faith and claim continuity with Israel's heritage.

Matthew's Gospel was a theological response to a deep division between two communities - Judaism and Jewish Christianity, each claiming to be the true heir to the promises of the fathers. Thus, Matthew presents every aspect of Jesus' life as the fulfilment of Scripture, grounding his community's identity and hope in the divine plan revealed in Jesus.

5. OLD TESTAMENT CITATIONS IN MATTHEW'S INFANCY NARRATIVE

LIFE EVENT	ST. MATTHEW	O.T. REFERENCE
Birth from a virgin and called Emmanuel	1:23	Isa. 7:14
Born in Bethlehem	2:5,6	Mic. 5:2
Worshipped by wise men and presented with gifts	2:11	Ps. 72:10; Isa. 60:3,6,9
Escape to Egypt	2:13	Num. 24:8; Hos. 11:1
His birthplace would suffer a massacre of infants	2: 16 - 18	Jer. 31:15
Called a Nazarene	2:23	Isa. 11:1

Matthew's Gospel is deeply concerned with the theme of fulfilment from the very beginning. According to R.T. France, Matthew's opening genealogy (Mt. 1:1 - 17) clearly aims to link Jesus directly to the Old Testament, particularly to Abraham and David, emphasizing Jesus' messianic and royal lineage. The use of the phrase "Biblos geneeseōs" echoes Genesis,

suggesting a new beginning, and the structured symmetry of the genealogy (verse 17) signals that all of Israel's history culminates in Jesus. The rest of the prologue (Mt. 1:18-2:23) contains five short narratives, each including at least one explicit Old Testament quotation said to be fulfilled by events in Jesus' birth and early childhood. Additionally, each of the stories in Chapter 2 refers to place names tied to Scripture, reinforcing Matthew's claim that Jesus' life fulfils God's promises revealed in the Old Testament.

6. CONCLUSION

Matthew emphasises that God accomplishes his divine plan in Jesus. By the significant use of the 'fulfilment formulae' Matthew finds implicit truth about Jesus throughout the Jewish Scriptures explaining how these quotations apply to Him. He places the fulfilment formulae at strategic places throughout his Gospel making his concern for fulfilment clear throughout. The motif of fulfilment is very significant in the prologue. Matthew structures the narrative of Jesus' birth and childhood by ways of indirect and direct references to the Jewish Scriptures. Thus, he emphasizes that Jesus according to the Scriptures came to save God's people from their sins. Matthew uses the formula quotations as tools, internally to encourage the Christian community to understand their faith in the context of the God of Israel and externally to justify his communities' convictions about Jesus. He bases his argumentation effectively on the mutual conviction that the Jewish Scriptures are authoritative and need eschatological fulfilment.



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Becoming Free, Becoming Human: A Theology of Grace and Communion

Fr. Aaron Joshua John

Freedom is not a new desire. Every generation longs for it, defines it, legislates it, and yet remains curiously restless in its pursuit. In political arenas, freedom is equated with rights; in consumer culture, with choice; in modern psychology, with autonomy. But the Apostle Paul, in Galatians 5:1, anchors freedom in a different register. This is not the freedom to do whatever one pleases, but the freedom made possible because of Christ. It is a freedom not constructed by human effort, but given. Yet Paul warns, this freedom can be lost, not forcibly taken, but surrendered voluntarily by returning to the enslaving systems, patterns, or postures. His call to “stand firm” is not a defensive manoeuvre; it is an invitation to maturity. What, then, is the nature of this freedom? And why does it bring joy?

Freedom as Becoming Fully Human

Christian freedom is not the same as escaping boundaries. It is, in fact, the process by which people become more fully themselves, released from fear, guilt, and fragmentation, and open towards communion. The early Christian imagination did not think of salvation as simply being saved ‘from’ something; it was being saved ‘for’ something; participation in the divine life, and a return to one’s true form.

In this light, freedom is a creative responsibility. It is the condition in which love becomes possible, not as command, but as spontaneous joy. To be free is to act without compulsion, to give without calculation, and

to serve without humiliation. This is not the immature freedom of impulse or novelty, but the mature freedom of wisdom, what one calls the “freedom of alignment,” where the ‘heart’ and ‘will’ are no longer in conflict. This interior liberation is not easily attained. It is a path of self-awareness, humility, and trust. And it cannot be sustained by ego or ideology. It must be rooted in grace. The joy that flows from such freedom is not loud or ecstatic, it is quiet, steady, and radiant. It is the joy of no longer performing for gain, and no longer fearing the silence of one’s own soul.

Freedom Requires Inner Vigilance

There is a quiet irony in Paul’s words, ‘one can be set free, and yet choose to return to bondage’. The “yoke” may take different forms, external rules, internal compulsions, inherited systems of worth, but the danger is always the same: the slow forgetting of freedom’s origin.

True freedom always involves vigilance. Not the anxious self-protection of legalism, but a cultivated awareness that freedom can erode, not through violence, but through complacency. One cannot be passively free;





one must remain in freedom actively and intentionally. The spiritual disciplines, prayer, silence, service, study, are not restraints, but ways of keeping freedom alive. They prevent freedom from becoming an abstraction. As one modern theologian puts it, freedom is not merely to choose, but to choose well, with conscience formed, desires transformed, and love at the centre. When such freedom matures, it turns outward: it builds communities of trust, restores ruptured relationships, and dismantles the subtle tyrannies within ourselves.

The joy of Christian freedom is not found in escape but in return, to God, to others, to oneself. It is not the fleeting thrill of rebellion, nor the fragile calm of control. It is the joy of rootedness, of purpose, of living without masks or fear. When Paul declares that Christ has set us free, he is not offering a slogan. He is announcing a transformation that reaches the core of our being. And when he says, stand firm, he is not scolding but reminding: freedom

is a beginning, not an end. It must be received with gratitude and guarded with wisdom. Metropolitan Paulos Mar Gregorios reminds us that “true freedom is the ability to become fully human, in communion with God, others, and the world.” For him, freedom is not arbitrary license, but a state of deep inner harmony, a life animated by truth, responsibility, and love. In this vision, the joy of freedom is not self-celebration, but self-transcendence. It is the movement toward wholeness, where we are no longer bound by insecurity or pride, but drawn into the divine rhythm of life.

To live in this freedom is to taste joy, not the kind that fades, but the kind that deepens. The joy of being free because we are loved, and of loving because we are free.



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THE USE OF INCENSE IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Mariam Ceena Mathew

Liturgical worship has found different expressions in the practices of various Christian churches. Though differences exist in how Christian liturgy is practiced, there are certain ritual elements that are common to the ceremonial worship of all Orthodox churches – both Eastern and Oriental. One such element is the use of incense during worship. In this article, we will briefly look at the use of incense in worship, the possible purposes of incense, symbolism and how it is used in the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church.

The word ‘incense’ comes from the Latin word, *incendere*, which means ‘to burn’ or ‘to kindle.’ Most of the materials used as incense come from plants or trees, and these include myrrh and frankincense. These materials give a pleasing sweet smell when burned.

The use of incense played a significant role in the rites of different cultures and religions of the ancient world.¹ In the pre-Christian world, several uses of incense can

be identified.² (1) as a sacrifice to the deity; incense could also be seen as representing the presence of the divine; (2) to exorcise or drive away evil spirits; cleanse and purify spaces, and acting as a sign of God’s presence against evil, (3) as a sacrifice to the soul of a deceased human being; (4) to venerate a living person (5) as an accompaniment to processions, adding a touch of elegance, festivity and rejoicing; (6) as a refreshing perfume at banquets and other occasions; (7) as a means of purification and healing.

The practical use of incense is that it can be used to drive away unpleasant odors. Therefore, the early evidence for the use of incense is found in cultures and countries located in warm climates, where incense would be necessary in attempting to do away with the unpleasant smells. “To offer something pleasant to the nostrils seems to be an important motivation for the use of incense in religious rites and in daily life.”³

While attempting to find out how the use of incense entered Christian worship, one will certainly be led to its biblical roots. The use of incense was a common practice in Jewish traditions as can be seen in the Old Testament scriptures. As seen in Exodus 30, the use of incense by the people of Israel is based on a commandment of God, where directions for the construction of the incense altar, the production of incense and its correct use are also given. There is a distinction between lawful and unlawful worship there; the lawful requires Aaron to burn incense on the golden incense altar in front of the holy of holies every morning and evening. In Leviticus 16, incense is seen as a protection against God's wrath (16:12-13) and the cloud of smoke it produces is the symbol of the call upon the deity and the deity's appearance (16:2). In the book of Numbers, Aaron stops the plague by placing himself with burning incense between the dead and the living (Numbers 16:46-48).

The Old Testament also attests the use of incense as a cosmetic and medicine.⁴ That God is pleased in the offering of incense is seen in Malachi 1:11, where it says, "For from the rising of the sun to its setting, my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts." And the Old Testament verse that is read during vespers in most Orthodox churches is Psalm 141:2, where prayers are likened to incense; "Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice!"

In addition to the Old Testament, the use of incense is mentioned in the New Testament as well. The continuation of the temple rituals practiced by the Jewish people is what is seen in Luke. In St. Luke 1:8-13, an angel of God appears to Zechariah while he is burning incense at the Temple. This also shows that

incense brings the presence of God. In St. Mathew 2:11, the gospel writer records that the Magi brought incense to baby Jesus as a gift. Thus, incense is an offering made to God. Another place where incense appears in the New Testament is Revelation. In Revelation 5:8, incense is used to denote the prayers of the faithful. And Revelation 8:3-5 says, "And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne; and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, voices, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake."

Though the use of incense appears in the New Testament as part of worship, there is no evidence in the scriptures to show that incense was used in worship by the early Church. In fact, during the early centuries of Christianity, Christians were reluctant to include the use of incense in its worship. This was almost certainly because of the association of incense with emperor worship, the ceremonies of the pagan world and the test of loyalty to the emperor which Christians were forced to endure. The earliest instance of a Christian use of incense is at the funeral procession of St. Peter of Alexandria in 311.⁵

In the 4th century, Christians slowly began to change their views on the use of incense. The use of incense to venerate the relics of saints, altars, holy places and persons was initially the most common reason for its usage.⁶ By the end of the 5th century some use of incense in Christian churches appears to have been more or less universal.⁷ As incense was introduced into the offices of matins and vespers, it signaled a sacrificial use of incense. St. John Chrysostom, in his commentary on

Psalms 141, claimed that the vesper service was basically a penitential rite. Therefore, the use of incense during vespers was given a propitiatory meaning. It expressed the human self-offering of repentance.⁸

So, the use of incense began to be associated with the prayers of forgiveness of sins in Christian worship. This is evident from the prayers that are said when incense is offered. The use of incense today in Christian worship could be linked to few purposes. It is seen as an offering before God, asking forgiveness of sins, and purification of souls. It is also used to venerate the altar and the elements placed at the altar and the icons. In Orthodox worship, not only is the altar, the Gospel book and the icons censured, but also the people. Human beings are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and therefore they themselves are icons of Christ. Thus, people are always censured when incense is offered during the services. Offering of incense is also a sacrifice offered to God, as it is a reminder of the perfect sacrifice made by Christ once and for all on the cross, which was a sweet-smelling sacrifice to God.

In Christian worship, much of the acts and practices have symbolic meanings, and as such, incense and the censer in which the incense is offered, also have symbolic meanings. The censer is seen as a symbol of the humanity of Christ and the fire, his divinity.⁹ This image of 'fire united to the coal' is used by Cyril of Alexandria as a type of the mystery of the incarnation. The incense is then seen as the fragrance of the life of Christ offered to God the Father on behalf of the Church. This accompanies the litanies to signify that the life of Christ mediates between us and God.

There is another symbolism that is associated with the censer and the incense.¹⁰ The upper cover of the censer represents heaven and the bottom container represents the earth. The charcoal represents humans who

are sinful and the fire represents the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Just like the coal burns and shines because of the fire, humans also are forgiven of their sins (their sins are burned) and are able to shine through the working of the Holy Spirit. In this symbolism, incense is mostly associated with the forgiveness of sins.

The rubrics of the liturgical services of the Malankara Orthodox Church prescribe that incense must be offered during the propitiatory prayers, *Prumiyon*, *Ethro*, and *Kukiliyon*, as well as during the reading of the Gospel. A *Kukiliyon* is a prayer in a hymn form that is associated with intercession (Mother of God and Saints), veneration (Holy Cross) and prayer for the departed (Clergy and the Faithful). *Prumiyon* is part of a set of prayers for the forgiveness of sins. *Ethro* means 'prayer of incense' and is always accompanied by the offering of incense. The use of incense during these prayers shows that incense is associated with absolution of sins as well as veneration. Again, the use of incense during Gospel reading is a symbol of the honor given to it. Thus, incense does serve several purposes in Christian worship.

During the preparatory prayers (*Thooyobo*) in the Syrian rite, the prayer is for the forgiveness of sins and recalls the incense offerings in which God was pleased in the Old Testament. This service is held right before liturgy and prepares us for the liturgy. Forgiveness of sins is important because when one comes to take part in the Blood and Body of Christ, one must be reconciled with God and with others. So, during these prayers for remission of sins, incense is offered in the manner of the offerings of the Old Testament.

Prayers connected with incense are almost always connected with the forgiveness of sins. Yet, incense is also a means of veneration and intercession. Incense is offered during the various intercessory prayers / *Kukiliyon* in the Syriac tradition. We even call it 'dhoopa

praarthana' as incense accompanies these prayers. We see an intersection of veneration, intercession and prayer for forgiveness, in the concluding prayer during the preparation also: "May the just and the righteous, the prophets and apostles, the martyrs and the confessors and the holy Mother of God, Mary and all the saints,... be intercessors and suppliants unto Thee on behalf of the souls of all of us... and by Thy grace, make atonement for the sins of our faithful departed." Here once again, even though it is an intercession, it is asking for the remission of sins.

Incense is offered whenever the *Evangelion* is read during the liturgical services. This is to show reverence as well as to remind the assembled about the presence of God. The use of incense adds to the ceremonial nature of Christian worship, which is part of the "cosmic sacrament of our saving God," and is "a means of communion with God."¹¹ The 'cloud of incense' that arises during the Gospel reading is a reminder of God's communication to us through the Scripture. Thus, incense can be seen as a symbol of God's presence. But once again, the Gospel speaks of Christ through whom our sins are forgiven.

A survey of the Syrian preparatory prayers and other liturgical services reveals that the use of incense is associated with the forgiveness of sins. The offering of incense has a penitential meaning as it is a symbol of our self-offering of repentance rising with our prayers and our uplifted hands. The offering of incense in the Old Testament was mainly for the forgiveness of sins, in addition to the fact that it symbolized the presence of the divine. Thus, it should not be a big surprise that the Orthodox churches whose worship has much symbolic meaning, adopted this ancient practice of offering incense, while asking forgiveness of sins before participating in the Divine Liturgy. After all, Christian worship has adopted many

elements from the Jewish practices, including the vestments used by the clergy, and the concept of the hours of prayer. In addition, the New Testament attests that the use of incense is part of heavenly worship.

Incense has become part of the ceremonial worship in Christian churches, especially Orthodox churches. This might be due to the familiarity with the Temple worship that is seen in scriptures, where incense was offered following a divine commandment. And as seen in Revelation, the heavenly hosts worship God with the accompaniment of incense. Incense is capable of reminding us that our prayers must rise up to the presence of God as sweet smelling offerings. In Christian worship, incense is offered as an offering to God asking for forgiveness of sins. It also symbolizes divine presence and the honor given to God.

End Note:

¹ Paul F. Bradshaw, *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 242.

² Peter E. Fink, S. J., *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 595.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bradshaw, 242.

⁵ Fink, 595.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1964), 427.

⁸ Fink, 595.

⁹ Bradshaw, 134.

¹⁰ Yuhanon Mar Severios, *Orthodox Suriyani Sabhayude Shushroosha Samvidhana Sahaayi*, (Kottayam, India: Malankara Orthodox Church Publications, 2007), 129.

¹¹ Robert Taft, *Beyond East & West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding*, (Washington D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1984), 135.



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Scriptures and Orthodoxy

Varughese Mathew

We know of a very learned first-century Jew who lived at the same time and place as Jesus—Saul of Tarsus, who later became St. Paul. Tradition says he was the son of a rich merchant who had numerous ships sailing across the known world at that time. Saul was a product of the best Jewish and Greek universities of the time. He knew the Jewish Scriptures very well, having learned them under Gamaliel, one of the most respected teachers of that era.

How did Saul understand the Scriptures? In his Jewish understanding, Christians were heretics. He believed they had it all wrong, that they were corrupting society, and that they should be killed and their teachings eliminated at any cost.

On the road to Damascus, he encountered the Risen Christ. His eyes were opened to the new light of Christ, and his understanding of Scripture changed. He writes about this in his second letter to the Corinthians: “Unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look at what was passing away. But their minds were blinded, for until this day the same veil remains un-lifted in the reading of the Scriptures (Old Testament), because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless, when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away”. St. Paul is saying here that unless one turns to the Lord, the veil will not be removed.

Orthodoxy understands Scriptures in the

same way it was revealed to St. Paul. Christ himself says that “Moses wrote of me” in John 5:45. In Genesis 2:24 it says “Man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” about Adam and Eve. St. Paul teaches us this is about the mystery of Christ and His Church, and not about history.

When St. Paul was writing this, the New Testament was not yet compiled. The Scriptures he mentions is the Old Testament itself. Scriptures can be read as history and like any other Jew, that was his understanding before he met the Risen Christ. In Protestant Churches and New Generation sectarians, they consider the Bible as history and get the incorrect meaning of Scriptures. Meeting the Risen Christ changes our perspective, helping us to understand Scripture in the right way.

Unfortunately, many people teach Old Testament stories as history in our Churches which is causing confusion and disbelief. For example, the story of Adam and Eve - any high school level educated person will question the legitimacy of that story and will not believe in it.

Church’s teaching from the very beginning is that it is about Christ and His Church and it is not considered as historical. In Luke chapter 24, we read about two disciples fleeing Jerusalem to Emmaus after the crucifixion of Jesus. On the way, they meet a stranger and talk about Jesus, whom they believed was the Messiah who would become King, overthrow Roman rule, and deliver their nation from centuries of oppression. But instead, He was captured by the Jews and Romans, crucified, and died. They mentioned that some women had gone to the tomb that morning after the Sabbath and found it empty. Confused and afraid, they were fleeing for their safety.

The stranger then tells them: “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ



to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory? “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them all the Scriptures concerning Himself. What did Jesus explain? The Church knows what He taught. The song “Mystery, mystery the Lord proclaimed; mystery for me and my household...”, which we sing on Holy Thursday, explains the mysteries hidden in the Old Testament, as Christ taught: “Moses and all the Prophets wrote of Me.” The parting of the sea and Moses leading his people to the Promised Land were all about Christ being baptized into death. By His death, He trampled our death, and now leads us to the Kingdom of God. The song continues to teach

that the heavenly manna is His Body—the Holy Qurbana. The old manna was a foreshadowing of it.

The meaning of Scripture that Jesus explained to them and the Holy Qurbana—opened their eyes. While celebrating Qurbana, we do the same: first, the Gospel is read and explained, and then the Bread is broken and given to the partakers. After the prayer and thanksgiving, He broke the Bread and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened, and they realized it was Jesus. After they ate the Bread—His Body—they could no longer see Him; He disappeared from their sight. They understood that they could not see Jesus “out there” anymore, because they had put on the identity of the Son of God and had become like Christ. St. Paul teaches us: “Christ, the Hope of Glory, dwells in you”; “You are the Temple of God!”

Our Lord told His disciples to celebrate the Qurbana in His remembrance. We remember Him through the Scriptures. In the song sung before the opening of the veil, we recall Old Testament events: the lamb of Abel, the offerings of Noah, the sacrifice of Abraham, the fire that rested on the bush without burning it, the incense of Aaron and Zechariah, the prayers of the Ninevites, the prayer of Jonah from Sheol, and God’s mercy to the people of Nineveh. We remember the Annunciation to Mary and the martyrs. Through this remembrance, the Church invites all sinners to come for forgiveness, and all the departed to be at the right hand of the Father.

Standing at the foot of the Cross, looking at the frail and dying body of Christ, the Church, along with the angels, proclaims: “Holy are You, O God; Holy are You, Almighty; Holy are You, Immortal; Crucified for us, have mercy on us” —as taught by St. Ignatius of Antioch. The Blessed Apostles proclaimed His Gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven to the ends of the Earth. St. Paul teaches that anyone who listens

to a gospel other than this will be cut off from the Church.

As Christ was elevated on His Throne, the Cross, the priest ascends the steps of the Altar, we cry aloud along with the thief asking for mercy in our weakness. We embrace one another with the peace of our Lord. We remember His death, we confess His Resurrection, and we await His Second Coming. Isaiah saw the vision: as His Body was pierced on the Cross, we cry out with the angels: “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord; Holy are You, Son of God”. Fiery angels tremble before Him, and we see Him as Bread and Wine on the Altar.

So let us learn and teach the True Faith. Orthodoxy in the right way. All glory and honor to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.



(Mr. Varughese Mathew is a member of Sts. Baselios-Gregorios Orthodox Church, North Plainfield, New Jersey.)

A large, white, stylized quotation mark icon centered within a dark green circular background.

“Selfishness is not only imperfection but also sin. In an ideal family each lives for others and no one lives for himself. A mother does not enjoy food unless she shares it with her children. Sharing is a joy and not a burden in a family. Selfish accumulation of wealth is a sin in a society where others are in dire need. One who refuses to share is lacking in the Christian virtue of self-giving love.”

H. G. Geevarghese Mar Osthathios,
‘Theology of a Classless Society’, p. 94

The Old Testament and Cultural Nationalism

Fr. K. V. Alias

Introduction

Some of the terms need to be defined before going deep into the topic. One term is nationalism. It is defined as “loyalty” and devotion to a nation, especially as expressed in a glorifying of one nation above all others and a stressing of the promotion of its culture and interests (Merriam-website Dictionary). It is an ideology and movement that promotes the interests of a particular nation, emphasizing its unique identity, culture and often its sovereignty. Then, it has various manifestations of nationalism; viz cultural, civic, racial and ethnic.

Cultural nationalism is a term used by scholars of nationalism to describe efforts among intellectuals to promote the formation of national communities. Johann Gottfreid von Herder (1744-1805), a German Philosopher, Theologian, Poet, Literary critic and a Lutheran clergy is the Father of Cultural Nationalism. He emphasized the idea of a country as an organic entity distinguished by a distinctive language and culture. Then cultural nationalism could be defined as a form of nationalism where the nation is defined by shared culture rather than common ancestry or political structure.

J. G. von Herder points that humanity with its distinct capacity for culture, is naturally divided into cultural groups referred to as nations, each of which has a unique character.

He further states that no great harm can befall a nation than to be robbed of its character by being deprived of its language, for without its language it loses its own mode of thinking.

Bible and Cultural Nationalism

Here, in this part, we look into the Old Testament to see how the fabric of cultural nationalism is working or has worked in the formation of the nation of Israel. For this we may look into a few characters, themes and events in the Old Testament.

Covenant: In the Old Testament, we come across a few covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses on Mount Sinai and David. In these Abrahamic, Sinaitic & Davidic covenants are significant. Covenants are of two types: Unconditional and conditional. Covenant by definition is a binding agreement between God and his people. The key elements are chosen-ness, a promised land, a set of laws/principles and a relationship of mutual obligations. In the Abrahamic covenant, there is no condition (its true with Noahic covenant also), but there is the promise of land and chosen-ness. But in Sinaitic covenant with Moses, there is the condition, stipulated by the commandments and obligation of the people to the Law, which gives a band of slaves a new identity as Gods people/nation.

When it is with David, this turns to become a political nationhood with a territory



and central cultic place. Through Abraham and his election, these people of promise, assume a common ancestry and origin from one person (Gen. 14 & Is. 51:3) which is a basic concept of cultural nationalism.

Sinaitic covenant on the other hand governs their cultic practices and internal relations, where the so-called gentiles are out of their frame. By observing the law and cult they are assuming a new status which according to them are superior than that of the gentiles. Therefore, others are considered inferiors.

David's Kingship: David's story is deeply intertwined with the development of cultural nationalism. He united the twelve tribes of Israel, creating a shared identity and purpose to form a political nation with specific territory. Jerusalem was made the religious and political centre. He was cherished in later history as a hero and brave warrior, whose legacy, is believed to be eternal. Thus, King David's story has been instrumental in shaping cultural nationalism, particularly within Jewish identity.

Throughout these, what we recognize is that the Hebrew language has been very basic to the Jewish culture and nationalism.

Exile and Aftermath: We read in the Old Testament that after Solomon, the Kingdom was divided and at a later stage, the Northern part (Israel) had been taken over by the Assyrians (721 BCE). By assimilation and dispersion, they had lost (it is interpreted) their racial and ancestral purity. Hence, the south (Judea) rejected them as untouchable or as equal to gentiles. South also was a vassal to Assyria, but as the Assyrians fell to the Babylonians,

they tried for independence. Biblical narratives explain that Judea/Jerusalem fell before the Babylonians in 586. This marked a 'defeat' which gave them a hope of restoration. This defeat resulted in the loss of Land/territory, Kingship and Temple; their symbol of cultural identity. But the hope was that, as long as they have the language and the Holy Scripture and faith in the covenantal God, they will return and resume the land, regime and temple.

Ezra and Nehemiah: These books give us information about two main struggles they have addressed: Restoring the temple (Ez. 1:1-6:22); and need for spiritual reformation (7:1-10:44). Through these, they may renew the fellowship with the Lord. Ezra emphasizes the importance of religious observance, ethnic purity and the re-establishment of Jewish laws and traditions as central to defining and unifying the Jewish community (Aberbach David).

In essence, the Book of Ezra can be seen as a text that promotes a form of cultural nationalism by emphasizing the importance of religious and ethnic purity; the re-establishment of Jewish traditions and the use of political authority to enforce their principles, all within the context of post exilic Jewish Community.

We have been discussing the concept of Covenant, the paradigmatic role of David as King and the hope of a future dynasty and the work of Ezra, all contributing to the ideology of cultural nationalism. After the Roman invasion and depletion of the Jews all over the world, they did not lose their cultic vigour and language, though they are scattered all over

the world. This culture and the feel of unity, still works within their social involvement and we are witnesses today to the formation of the nation of Israel in 1948 and the ongoing conflict.

In India: In 1923 Vinayak Damodar Savarkar introduced the concept of Hindutva. Jawaharlal Nehru sensed the danger of this and once said “the challenge to India’s democracy would come not from communism but a resurgence of religious fanaticism” (cited by Solomon Victus, *Cultural Nationalism: The Making of an Indian Nation*. Serampore: SATHRI/ SSC, 2021).

Hindutva is a cultural concept. According to Savarkar, a Hindu is someone who considers India both their *Pitrubhoomi* and *Punyabhoomi*. This definition includes the followers of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Muslims and Christians are excluded from these, though they are ethnically Indian (Dr. Pushpa Joshy, “Veer Savarkar and the Evolution of Hindutva: Ideological Foundations and Contemporary Implications” in IJIRT, 11/3,

August 2024. Pp 47-54.).

The present Indian scenario is in congruence with Savarkar’s concept, which Nehru sensed as a threat to Indian Democracy and Secularism.

Conclusion

Though the term Cultural Nationalism is pretty modern, it is an inherent concept in the Old Testament. The whole history of the people of God, as described in the Old Testament is about how a nation is formed, sustained, demolished and hoped for on the basis of culture and ethnicity. This idea of the Old Testament has given rise to the sense of nation as an accepted fact, for many of the Euro-Asian countries. India, at least by the first quarter of the 20th century onwards thought in this stream, and now we are at the threshold of cultural nationalism.



(Rev. Fr. K. V. Alias serves as a faculty member at the Orthodox Theological Seminary, Kottayam.)

BRIDEGROOM WANTED

Orthodox Christian parents from Kottayam Diocese, now settled in the U.S., invite proposals from parents of God-fearing, well-educated, and professionally settled Orthodox Christian boys for their daughter, born and brought up in the U.A.E., currently pursuing her Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) in the U.S. She is 5’3 and currently 22 years old, kind-hearted and family-oriented. We prefer proposals from men working or studying in the U.S., Canada, or and preferably Gulf countries willing to move to the U.S. The marriage would be conducted sometime after July of 2027.

Contact -

marriage.proposals2003@gmail.com



SAVE OUR CHILDREN

Cherian Mathew

Children's Day is around the corner. At this time, it is a worthwhile pursuit channelling some of our thoughts on our children – where they are today and what their future holds in a fast-changing world that finds our foundational ethics in free-fall.

There is a noticeable uptick in news stories and studies that talk about couples choosing to remain child-free, and the reasons are as layered as they are personal. A recent report shows India's fertility rate dropping below the replacement level in many states. Experts attribute this to both medical factors and conscious lifestyle choices—urban couples are increasingly delaying or opting out of parenthood to prioritize careers, for financial stability or personal freedom. Does that mean that we may see fewer children going forward? Maybe. But more about that later.

On November 14th, as India celebrates Children's Day, we have a unique opportunity to reflect not only on the joy and innocence of childhood, but on its sacred significance in Scripture, tradition, and community life. In a world that often measures worth by productivity and power, Christianity offers a counter-cultural lens—one that sees children not as future adults, but as present-day bearers of grace.

In Matthew 19:14, Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." This wasn't a sentimental gesture – it was a theological statement. In a society where children were often overlooked, Jesus placed them at the centre of the kingdom narrative. Our homes should echo this truth in quiet ways; bedtime prayers whispered by toddlers, Sunday school songs sung off-key but with full hearts, and the wide-eyed wonder of children hearing Bible stories for the first time. These moments aren't peripheral – they're sacred.

Children are not merely passive recipients of faith. Studies in developmental psychology and theology, increasingly affirm that children possess spiritual intuition, moral reasoning, and the capacity for awe. We do pray that our Spiritual education is robust – from Sunday school classes to Vacation Bible Schools – children often surprise us with their theological depth. This education should continue and furthermore be strengthened. Consider young Samuel, who heard God's voice in the temple, or Timothy, mentored by St. Paul from a young age. Their stories remind us that spiritual leadership can begin in childhood. We would do well to not just teach children, but listen to them as well.

Ask Malankara Orthodox adults about their childhood, and you'll likely hear stories of:

- Every day family prayers, often by rote but

with some distillation of meaning, however rudimentary.

- Bible verse memorization contests, with rewards ranging from condiments to Sunday school stars.
- Christmas pageants, where every child was either a shepherd, angel, or sheep – sometimes all three.

These rituals, though simple, formed the spiritual scaffolding of generations. They also reflect our unique blend of liturgical richness and familial devotion.

The Mission Statement of the OSSAE reads, “This is a spiritual organization functioning in all the parishes of the Orthodox Church throughout the world. It takes care of the spiritual nurturing of the children by bringing them up in the knowledge and fellowship of Jesus Christ and His Church...” Our Church places deep emphasis on the spiritual formation of children, viewing them as integral members of the Church and future bearers of its faith and traditions. The teachings on child upbringing are primarily channelled through the OSSAE.

The Church sees children as divine blessings entrusted to families and the faith community. Their upbringing is considered a sacred responsibility. The goal is to raise children in the “knowledge and fellowship of Jesus Christ and His Church”. This includes instilling reverence for liturgy, scripture, sacraments, and Orthodox traditions. Children are taught values such as humility, obedience, compassion, and honesty – modelled after Christ’s life and teachings.

OSSAE runs structured classes across parishes, with syllabi tailored to age groups while OVBS are held annually. These immersive programs combine biblical learning with creative activities to deepen children’s faith. Children are encouraged to attend the Holy Qurbana, observe fasting seasons, and participate in feasts and

festivals to build spiritual discipline. Parents are expected to model prayer, scripture reading, and sacramental life at home, reinforcing what children learn in church.

The Church prioritizes spiritual depth over mere ritual compliance. Children are nurtured within a parish community, fostering a sense of identity and shared responsibility. While spiritual growth is central, the Church also supports intellectual, emotional, and social development through its educational and cultural programs.

Our Church has long invested in children’s ministry. But in today’s digital age, the challenge is to move beyond rote learning and into relational discipleship. Children need mentors, not just memory verses or vespers. They need space to ask questions, express doubt, and encounter God personally. Some parishes have begun integrating storytelling, art, and even digital media into their teaching. Others are reviving intergenerational worship, where children are taught the sanctity of the Holy Qurbana and its relevance – a seemingly archaic practice in a post-modern world, and more importantly they are meaningfully included. These are hopeful signs.

Children’s Day is not just a celebration – it’s a reminder. In a world where children face exploitation, neglect, and pressure, the Church must be a sanctuary. Christian families and institutions must:

- Advocate for child safety and education.
- Model Christ-like parenting rooted in grace, not fear.
- Create spaces where children are seen, heard, and loved.

Jesus didn’t say children will inherit the kingdom – He said they already do. As we honour children this November, let us do so not with mere sentiment, but with sacred responsibility. Let us see in every child not just

a future adult, but a present-day disciple, image-bearer, and gift.

And so coming back to the earlier premise – is parenthood worthwhile? Is it a blessing? Children are cherished not merely as additions to a family, but as divine gifts that reflect God's love, purpose, and covenant. The Bible consistently portrays children as blessings – spiritually, emotionally, and generationally.

Children are Divine Gifts. Psalm 127:3 says, "Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him." This verse anchors the belief that children are not earned or accidental – they are entrusted by God as part of His grace. James 1:17 reinforces this by stating, "Every good and perfect gift is from above..." – children included.

Children are a Covenantal Continuity. In Genesis 15:5, God promises Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars – a sign that children are central to the unfolding of divine promises. Acts 3:25 echoes this: "In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed." Children are the vessels through which God's blessings and purposes extend across generations.

Children are a Spiritual Joy and Responsibility. 3 John 1:4 says, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth." This reflects the deep spiritual satisfaction parents feel when their children grow in faith. Parents are called to be stewards of their children's spiritual journey. Ephesians 6:4 urges them to "bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."

Children Reflect the Kingdom of God. Jesus' words in Matthew 19:14 – "Let the little children come to me... for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" – elevate children as models of humility, purity, and faith. In Mark 10:16, Jesus blesses children, affirming their sacred worth and the divine favour upon them.

Children Affirm Legacy and Purpose. Proverbs 17:6 says, "Children's children are a crown to the aged." This highlights the generational joy and honour children bring. Raising children in faith is a way of participating in God's redemptive work – passing on truth, love, and righteousness to future generations.

Children are viewed in Orthodox theology – not merely as children in the eyes of the Church. Children are seen as gifts entrusted by God to families and the Church. The Malankara Orthodox Church emphasizes their spiritual formation through Sunday school, liturgical participation, and family prayer life.

The Church teaches that the home must become a "church at home." Parents are spiritual role models – faith must be lived, not just taught. As the Greek Orthodox Saint Ieronymos said, "When the children are young, talk to them about God; when they grow up, talk to God about them."

The Church supports not just spiritual but emotional and intellectual development. Sunday school and OVBS programs blend scripture with creativity, music, and storytelling. We should see child-rearing as sacred work. Raising children has never been an easy task. In fact, St. Gregory the Theologian calls it, 'the art of arts and the science of sciences'.

Children thrive in a parish that welcomes, teaches, and celebrates them. Festivals, feasts, and youth fellowships, reinforce belonging and joy. We are to be actively engaged – mentoring, storytelling, or simply showing up.

Let us on this Children's Day recommit to nurturing children in faith, love and wisdom.



(Mr. Cherian Mathew is a Sr. Finance Executive who retired as CFO at KAPICO, Kuwait, and is currently an independent Business Consultant in the UAE. His home parish is St. Mary's Orthodox Valiyapally, Jalahalli, Bangalore.)



The Problem of Excess

Kuruville Varghese

The recent increase of the menace of drug usage among youth is a major concern. It is commendable that the Malankara Orthodox Church has launched many good initiatives to counter this social evil. Substance abuse is much more widespread when compared to the last few decades. Similarly, we see more divorces, family disputes, suicides, accidents, atrocities against women and children, etc., when compared to the previous few decades. One reason for this situation is the loss of values in society, and one main reason behind this phenomenon is the 'problem of excess'.

Thirty or forty years ago, most people had to struggle hard for their daily existence and did not have the leisure or money to indulge in luxuries. Presently, economic growth aided by technological developments has increased the purchasing power of the people and resulted in comfortable living, which has many good consequences. Advances in medical science have addressed many health issues and

pandemics, which has reduced the mortality rate. But these advances have also created a listless and idle generation that spends a lot on apparel, cosmetics, gadgets and food. The apparel and cosmetic industries use celebrities like actors and sports stars to fuel young people's desires through advertisements. The herd mentality of the youth, aggravates the situation as they try to follow the new norm soon.

We also have excess gadgets such as smartphones, smart watches, notebooks, notepads, wireless headsets, etc. Once again, in the proper context, all these are immensely useful in a positive way. But the present generation is glued to screens; most get agitated and nervous without a screen. Gadget addiction is a serious concern. Here, having access to extra money and excess availability of these gadgets, fuel the acquisition and usage of these devices. Many hardly exploit the computing powers and features of these

gadgets. And the careless use of gadgets disturbs a disciplined lifestyle. Earlier, one visited a shop with a prepared list of things to buy and considered the price and utility before buying it. Now we walk into a supermarket without much plan, talk to family members on the phone and buy 'wanted and unwanted' things. If we open our wardrobe, we will see many dresses hanging. We build ever bigger houses with a lot of furniture, facilities, space and decorations, most of which are hardly used.

The excess production of food, apparel, equipment, etc., has contributed to the irrevocable destruction of the environment in terms of pollution causing climate change, the effects of which we experience now. Take the simple case of the earth-moving equipment we call a JCB (a front loader and a rear backhoe). JCBs are useful in excavation, construction, agriculture, and other areas. But, if someone acquires a JCB, it must be used and cannot lie idle. Excessive and unregulated use of heavy machinery like JCBs have caused the levelling of many hills and filling of many lakes.

Another issue we face in society is the excess of power. Even in democratically elected governments, leaders act like autocrats in every echelon of power. The national and international power play creates many wars, economic disturbances and poverty.

Excesses in one part of the society can cause scarcity in other sections. We often see shop after shop filled with food items in one part, while people die of starvation in another part. It is not a mere distraction problem; it is the problem of power, greed and lack of concern for others.

The malady does not stay in the secular society alone but has crept into Churches. Present-day churches are big marvels of architecture, filled with more than required church equipment. It seems that some priests

are more project managers than shepherds of the flocks, attending to their spiritual needs. We have feasts of grandeur, lavish celebrations and ambitious events. Churches and leaders spend more time on propaganda than acquiring Christ's nature.

Now that we have discussed Christ let us get down to brass tacks. Christ, the creator of the magnificent universe, when tempted by Satan the third time, rejected the desire for power or wealth. (St. Matthew 4:8-10). The Bible passage clearly shows who controls the wealth and power. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ warns us against earthly treasures, tells us which master to obey and assures us that the Father will provide for our needs. (St. Mathew 6:21, 24, 33).

St. Paul portrays greed as idolatry in Colossians 3:5. It is not special in the New Testament only. We can find that the Old Testament also warns against excesses. In Leviticus 25, the concept of the sabbatical year for the land is introduced alongside the Year of Jubilee. The sabbatical year, occurring every seventh-year mandates that the land be left fallow, allowing for complete rest and natural growth to be consumed by all. Following seven sabbatical cycles (every 50th year), the Year of Jubilee involves even more significant social and economic changes, including releasing enslaved people and returning ancestral lands.

As a community of God's chosen people, royal priesthood and holy nation (1 Peter 2:9), we must reject excesses and choose the narrow gate of essentials (St. Matthew 7:14). May the Holy Spirit kindle the love of others in our hearts to move away from a life of self-centredness and greed to a life of sacrifice and love, which in turn will transform society.

❖ ❖ ❖

(Mr. Kuruvilla Varghese is the director of OSSAE-OKR, Bangalore diocese. He is a Chief Research Scientist at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore)

NEWS



'Religious Freedom Should Not Be Denied': His Holiness Baselios Marthoma Mathews III



Kottayam: 'Religious freedom is a constitutional guarantee, yet we are living at a time when it is being violated', said His Holiness Baselios Marthoma Mathews III, Catholicos of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. Recalling the vision of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the Catholicos stressed that equality, liberty, and fraternity are the core principles of the Constitution. The erosion of these principles, he said, is unbecoming of the culture of 'Arsha Bharata' (ancient, noble India). India's heritage embraces all diversities.

The Head of the Orthodox Church was speaking on the occasion of the Feast of the Assumption of the Holy Mother of God, the 110th memorial of the Patriarch Ignatius Abded Messiah II, and the Independence Day celebration at the Catholicate Palace, Devalokam. His Holiness also recalled that the Patriarch Abded Messiah, was the one who granted freedom to the Malankara Church.

Bava Thirumeni was the chief celebrant of the Holy Qurbana, while Yakob Ramban, the Aramana Manager, and Fr. Kurian Varghese were co-celebrants. Following the service Bava Thirumeni hoisted the national flag at the Church headquarters.

Intolerance Tarnishes the Image of India: Episcopal Synod Condemns the Arrest of Nuns

The Episcopal Synod of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church which met at Devalokam on July 29, 2025, expressed its deep concern over the growing intolerance against Christians across the country, and the recent attack on two Keralite nuns in Chhattisgarh.

In a statement, the Synod emphasized that India's inclusiveness and harmony in diversity is what sets it apart in the world. Unfortunately, the Chhattisgarh incident has tarnished our country's image in the eyes of the world.

The Synod strongly condemned the attack on the nuns in Durg, Chhattisgarh, by religious extremists, carried out in full view of the police. The nuns were questioned, subsequently arrested, and jailed on false charges of human trafficking and forced religious conversion. The Synod noted that the Chhattisgarh incident is yet another example of the misuse of the anti-conversion law across the country, and voiced concern over the growing threat to the secular fabric of the nation.

Stating that the essence of Christian Dharma is to reach out and lend a helping hand to the poor and downtrodden, the Synod reiterated that Christian missions continue vital humanitarian work among Dalit and tribal communities in various sectors such as education and healthcare, in keeping with their calling.

Those who view these services with hostility are, in fact, hindering national progress and undermining secular values. Government authorities must take action against such

religious fundamentalists and adopt measures to protect the fundamental rights guaranteed to all citizens by the Constitution of India.

Pointing out the increasing incidents of religious intolerance against Christians in many parts of the country, the Holy Synod strongly urged the government to ensure justice for the nuns arrested in Chhattisgarh.

JURISTCON 2025: LEGAL EXPERTS MEET



Kochi: "When there are demands to delete the terms Secularism and Socialism from the Preamble of the Constitution of India, it becomes the duty of every citizen to safeguard the Constitution," said His Holiness Baselios Marthoma Mathews III, while inaugurating JURISTCON 2025, a legal experts' meet organized by the Ernakulam Region of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church on Sunday, August 24, 2025, at St. George Orthodox Valiya Pally, Palarivattom, Ernakulam.

His Holiness reminded the audience that merely paying taxes and casting votes is not sufficient; a citizen must also act as an agent of change. He observed that the tendency to attack minorities, who have contributed significantly to nation-building, is unbecoming of those in authority. "The absence of adequate reservation and protective measures is a matter of grave concern," he added.

The Keynote Address on "Minority Rights and the Indian Constitution" was delivered by Hon'ble Justice K. Surendra Mohan, former Judge of the High Court of Kerala. Advocates Alexander George and M. Sonia led the subsequent discussions.

The meeting was presided over by His Grace Yuhanon Mar Polycarpus, Metropolitan of the Angamaly Diocese. Shri Ronny Varghese Abraham, Lay Trustee, delivered the Welcome Speech. Adv. Thomas Paul Ramban, Fr. Jacob Kurian, Fr. Simon Joseph, and Fr. Tiju K. Daniel also addressed the gathering.

Youth Must Become the Voice of the Voiceless: Minister Veena George



Chengannur: Health Minister Smt. Veena George inaugurated the OCYM Central Level Youth Week Celebration, organized by the Orthodox Christian Youth Movement (OCYM) from August 31 to September 7, at Bethel Aramana, Chengannur, under the auspices of the Chengannur Diocesan Youth Movement.

The convention was presided over by His Grace Dr. Mathews Mar Thimothios Metropolitan, Chengannur Diocese. In her inaugural address, Health Minister Smt. Veena George, emphasized that 'youth must become the voice of the voiceless' and actively participate in building a compassionate and just society.

The gathering also honoured His Grace Kuriakose Mar Clemis Valiya Metropolitan, Malankara Orthodox Church, on the occasion of his Navathi (90th birthday). Shri. P. C. Vishnunath MLA delivered the keynote address. A special 'Differently-Abled Friendly Gathering' was also organized simultaneously with the convention.

Other programmes conducted included the Inauguration of the Chengannur Diocesan

Youth Movement's Onakit distribution, the Inauguration of the Blood Donation Cell, the Merit Award distribution, and the Prize distribution for the Football Tournament winners.

Fr. Dr. Thomas Varghese Amayil (Priest Trustee), Adv. Biju Oommen (Malankara Association Secretary), Fr. P. K. Koshi (Diocesan Secretary), Fr. Thomas P. Ninan, Fr. Jain C. Mathew (Central Vice President), Fr. Viju Elias (General Secretary), Fr. Elvin Thomas (Diocesan Vice President), Shri. Renju M. Joy (Central Treasurer), Shri. Aprem Kunnil, Shri. Abu Abraham Veerapally, Shri. Robin Jo Varghese, Shri Jojo Joseph Zacharia, Shri Johan Joseph, and Shri Emil Dennis also addressed the gathering.

Over 500 delegates, including the Central Committee members of the Youth Movement, participated in the convention.

'Chare' Elderly Care Project Launched by Malankara Sabha



Pathanamthitta: His Holiness Baselios Marthoma Mathew III inaugurated the 'Chare' Elderly Care Project an initiative of the Akhila Malankara Prayer Fellowship at St. Stephen's Orthodox Cathedral, Makankunnu, Pathanamthitta.

In his address, the Catholicos emphasized that discarding or neglecting the elderly does not reflect well on our culture. He urged the churches to arrange regular gatherings-weekly or at least monthly- welcoming elderly people of all faiths. Such initiatives, he noted,

would give relief to the loneliness of elderly parents who often see and speak to their children and grandchildren only over the phone.

The meeting was presided over by HG Abraham Mar Seraphim, Metropolitan of the Diocese of Thumpamon. Suffragan Metropolitan HG Joseph Mar Barnabas, HG Kuriakose Mar Clemis (Senior Metropolitan), HG Mathews Mar Theodosios Metropolitan, HG Samuel Mar Iranios Metropolitan, Priest Trustee Fr. Thomas Varghese Amayil, Association Secretary Advocate Biju Oomen, Diocesan Secretary Very Rev. Johnson Kaleetathil Cor Episcopa, Central Vice-President Fr. Biju Mathews (Prakanam); and Central General Secretary Fr. Mathai Kunnil also addressed the gathering.

SNEHABHAVAN VELLORE

**35` Glorious Years of Humanitarian Service:
the Journey Continues...**



Snehabhavan, a charitable institution and the first of its kind in Vellore, was established in 1990 as a mission project in health care under the Madras Diocese of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. The establishment of Snehabhavan was a glorious milestone in the Orthodox Church's mission of service to humanity. Envisioned as a special project as part of the 60th Birth Anniversary of the Late Lamented H. G. Zachariah Mar Dionysius, the

former Metropolitan of the Madras Diocese, Snehabhavan thus brought to fruition the long-cherished vision of an institution offering solace to the sick and needy. The project is located at Sathuvachari, approximately three kilometers from the world-renowned Christian Medical College and Hospital (CMC) at Vellore, Tamil Nadu.

The objective of Snehabhavan is to provide low-cost accommodation and hospital guidance to patients undergoing treatment and medical care at CMC Hospital and their bystanders, who are physically, emotionally, or economically exhausted. Snehabhavan has played host and extended services to the lost, last, and least, with a preferential option for the poor and the underprivileged, without any discrimination. Snehabhavan is always ready to lend a helping hand round the clock, receiving people from Katpadi Railway Station and ensuring their safe departure as well. Services such as pastoral care, counselling, hospital guidance, and patient navigation are also available.

With around sixty rooms at present, Snehabhavan provides a home-like environment with clean, hygienic accommodation and nutritious, homely food at affordable rates for patients' families. The chapel, with its regular worship, serves as a refuge and a powerhouse of prayer for the distressed. The main aim is to provide support to patients for the holistic healing of body, mind, and soul.

Recently, Vellore CMC Hospital has opened a new Super Speciality Hospital at Kannigapuram, located 12 kilometers away from the present hospital. All super speciality departments have been shifted to this new campus, which also houses the only Trauma Care Centre between Chennai and Bangalore.

Recognizing the urgent need for a patient guidance centre near the new hospital, the

Madras Diocese of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church has purchased 50 cents of land close to the campus for the Snehabhavan project. The proposed centre will include a Chapel, an accommodation block with 72 rooms, an office, a canteen, and related amenities. The estimated project cost is approximately 12 crores. We earnestly seek your valuable support and generous contribution for the successful completion of this most deserving project.

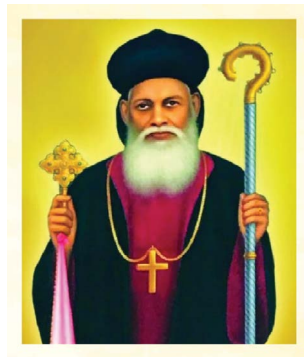
We humbly solicit your generous support for this crucial humanitarian venture. Your contribution will go a long way in wiping away the tears of hundreds of patients and their families who come to CMC Vellore seeking hope and healing.

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ." – Galatians 6:2

For enquiries please contact Fr. Saju Unnonni, Director

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Servants of the Cross Society: Centenary Celebrations



Parumala: The Centenary Celebrations and the Family Sangamam of the Servants of the Cross Society, a mission-society of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, was held recently at the Parumala Seminary. In his address at the valedictory session of the Centenary Celebrations, His Grace Kuriakose Mar Clemis,

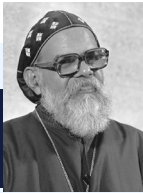
Senior Metropolitan of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, described the Servants of the Cross Society as “a great asset and light of the Church.” The Metropolitan lauded the great contributions of H.G. Pathrose Mar Osthathios, the founder of the Society, whose passion was the upliftment of the depressed classes.

H.G. Pathrose Mar Osthathios founded the Servants of the Cross Society on 14 September 1924 while he was a Deacon (Dn. M. P. Pathrose). His great desire was empowering the downtrodden sections in the Kerala society. Deacon Pathrose visited their huts, read out newspapers and introduced Jesus Christ to them. There are more than five thousand Servants of the Cross families in Kerala today. The society has helped 22,000 individuals from depressed communities to obtain higher

education thereby raising their standards of living.

H G Geevarghese Mar Coorilos, President of the Society, chaired the session. Dr Sissa Thomas, Vice Chancellor, Kerala Digital University, delivered the key note address. Justice Benjamin Koshy offered felicitations. His Grace Dr. Yuhanon Mar Chrysostomos, Secretary of the Holy Episcopal Synod, handed over the keys of the 10 houses constructed in connection with the centenary celebrations. Various Scholarships and other Charitable donations were also distributed.

Fr. Thomas Myalil, Fr. Dr. Somu K. Samuel, Fr. P K. Thomas, Fr. Saji Mekad, Parumala Seminary Manager Fr. Eldo Elias, Mr. P M. Santhosh, Miss M. K. Lissy and Mr. K. K. George spoke on the occasion.



A few sentences from H.G. Paulos Mar Gregorios' last will as given in his autobiography 'Love's Freedom: The Grand Mystery'

“In Him I put my trust. Christ is my all. Without Him I am nothing at all. The life I live is Christ's. ...I have no life of my own. I live in Him and He lives in me. Christ never forsakes me, ...His love stays steadfast even when my loyalty grows feeble..... Him I adore, Him I worship as God and Man, Him I hold as without peer, the only Begotten of God, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, One True God.

And Christ's love is for all humankind, not just for Christians. It is for the whole of humanity that he has died, not just for Christians alone. He lives for the human race, and he is the lover and Saviour, as well as Lord of the whole race of humankind. How can I then draw any limits to my love and compassion, or deny it to any group of human beings? Even those who regard themselves as my enemies I am not to hate or exclude from Christ's love and compassion. That has been the basis for my approach to all sorts of groups, ...

Christ is for me much more than a great teacher of humanity..... Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God who became Son of Man, took on our sin and suffering upon himself, sacrificed himself on the Cross, died and rose again from the dead to live forever and to reconcile the whole creation to God in himself. He is the victor over sin and death, over evil and disintegration. In him everything holds together, and in him shall the whole creation, purged of all evil, be finally harmonized. This I believe, and I have no reason to hide my faith, though I do not talk about it all the time. I live by this faith. This is the source-spring of my actions. 'This is the hope that keeps me from despair and despondency, even when everything looks so bleak and gloomy in God's world.'



December 25
Nativity of Christ

**The One Who - was born of His own will
In Bethlehem, wrapped in swaddling clothes,
O God, have mercy on us!**